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Minimal-Level Cataloging: A Look at the Issues—A Symposium

by Karen L. Horny

Minimal-Level Cataloging (MLC) is not a new concept but one that has become officially recognized and hotly debated since the promulgation in 1978 of the *National Level Bibliographic Record—Books (NLBR)* minimal-level cataloging standard for MARC field designation and fullness of bibliographic data in machine-readable records. AACR2 also defined a brief descriptive cataloging standard, termed "Level One." These records must contain the title proper, first statement of responsibility, publisher's name, date of publication, and extent of the item. Going beyond this absolute minimum, a number of libraries and networks have established expanded requirements for minimal-level cataloging "to standard."

Arguments for Minimal-Level Cataloging

In the reactions that follow this introduction, a number of the pros and cons for doing minimal-level cataloging are presented in detail. The basic assumption made by most MLC proponents is that some access, in a minimally defined format, is better for potential users than the complete absence of information for a given item. A frequently cited impetus for implementing an MLC plan is a desire to provide access to backlogs of unprocessed material when suitable copy is not available and there is no prospect of obtaining sufficient staff to do full cataloging. Another justification sometimes offered for MLC is that certain kinds of

materials may not require or even be worth the time and effort involved in creating a full bibliographic record.

Ways in which titles are chosen for minimal treatment and the fullness of records produced vary considerably from library to library and situation to situation. Some libraries decide to use their limited staff to do original cataloging for material on selected subjects and to contribute this copy, along with brief records for all other titles, to a bibliographic utility. They anticipate that other members will use their full original records and they hope that complete cataloging copy provided by other participants will eventually allow upgrading of their own partial records to full cataloging. The "fuller record notification" method available in RLIN furnishes one means of matching incoming full copy with brief records previously input.

LC's Involvement in Minimal-Level Cataloging

In introducing *NLBR*, the Library of Congress proposed use of minimal cataloging "to provide a standardized brief record for materials that might otherwise not be cataloged at all."¹ LC indicated the possibility that brief records could be input to bibliographic networks where they might subsequently be updated, and in 1983 it began offering a subscription to its own minimal-level cataloging records via the MARC Distribution Service. These records generally lacked subject analysis and classification numbers, and



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LC stated that it was unlikely that they would ever upgrade these records to full USMARC cataloging. Potential users were warned of possible inconsistencies and anomalies, since MLC records were devised by nonprofessionals and created using machine-generated content designation, and since they were not subject to the usual editorial procedures.

Authority control is a particularly problematic area of these MLC records. Headings were verified against LC's automated authority file; yet, if no match was found, an AACR2-like heading was input, but no authority work was done. More recently, the Library of Congress has introduced a newer standard for less-than-full cataloging: "MLC Plus." These records contain added entries for persons or corporate bodies when the main entry is under title, and also include additional fixed field data, but authority work continues to be performed in the previously established manner.

Network MLC Standards

It is generally recognized that participants in bibliographic utilities have routinely added a variety of "substandard" records to network databases. To ensure greater consistency in such less-than-full records, both RLG and OCLC have formalized their own official brief record standards. Although these standards vary slightly in the amount and selection of data required, both exceed the *NLBR* minimum and they result in very similar copy. It is assumed that network members can either use a brief record "as is" or upgrade it to full level with less effort and expense than complete original cataloging would have required. Locating a brief record coded as meeting the prevailing standard for MLC inspires confidence that the basic data are accurate and correctly formatted. Establishment of an "acceptable" MLC format has also encouraged libraries that are doing a number of brief records locally to share this data via the network rather than to keep the information in the local catalog only.

Philosophy and Practicality

Prior to extensive use of bibliographic utilities, partial records of various types, although created by many institutions, were of purely local concern. As librarians began to look beyond local interests to national forums that addressed the concept and practical application of MLC, a number of considerations arose. First to be debated was the

merit of cataloging more items briefly, rather than fewer items more fully. The primary impact is on user service, prompting much analysis of questions such as: Just how much access does a brief record provide? Is it adequate for user retrieval? Precisely what data and how much is necessary when defining an acceptable MLC standard for a particular library or consortium? Is a partial record suitable for network interlibrary loan and resource-sharing decisions? What obligations should a library have with respect to both local user interests and the broader community served by its bibliographic network? This evaluation quite naturally leads to a review of the presumed "worth" of the materials themselves. An assumption about the marginal or ephemeral nature of some items often motivates a decision to provide only minimal catalog access. These and other complex factors in the equation are covered in the following discussion.

"A significant problem inherent in increasing fullness requirements for MLC is the risk of eliminating a major portion of the time savings that originally justified the decision to do MLC."

Fullness of Record

Individual libraries have adopted wider variations than those established by bibliographic networks in determining local standards for minimal cataloging. Decisions have ranged from a conscious choice to create records that are "substandard" by network definition to a determination to provide additional access, frequently by adding classification and subject headings, and by doing more authority work than strictly expected to meet cooperative standards. A significant problem inherent in increasing fullness requirements for MLC is the risk of eliminating a major portion of the time savings that originally justified the decision to do MLC. The question of supplying subject analysis is a major area of debate: Is one "general" heading enough? — Perhaps sophisticated title keyword online catalog searching mech-

anisms can substitute for conventional subject heading assignments for some types of materials. How much attention should be given to series? — Prevailing opinion seems to require checking for a series' previous existence in the catalog and tracing it in accordance with established practice. When an item has a title main entry, frequent practice also supplies a personal name or corporate added entry as applicable.

Choice of Items for MLC

Because minimal records provide less access than full cataloging, much thought has been given to the appropriateness of MLC for various kinds of materials. Belles lettres, which seldom call for added entries or subject access, have been an obvious choice. Theses, textbooks, pamphlets, and art exhibition catalogs are other categories sometimes selected for brief, quick treatment. If identifiable types of acquisitions are not designated, the choice becomes more complex: who determines which individual items should be minimally cataloged? Bibliographers? Public services staff? Catalogers? No matter who makes the decision, a certain amount of time will be expended in the process. If too much time is lost, the benefits of MLC may be outweighed.

Most Effective Use of Staff

When available book funds have outpaced personnel resources dedicated to processing incoming materials, an argument in favor of utilizing limited staff for MLC can carry particular weight. This consideration may be much less compelling, however, when an online, integrated system displays provisional precataloging (e.g., acquisitions) records in the online public catalog. Since these records often essentially meet minimal-level standards, it is possible to regard them as adequate for retrieving items for immediate circulation or "rush" cataloging on demand. In this environment, efforts may be more fruitfully devoted to providing full original cataloging for as many titles as the cataloging unit can handle. An important factor in the decision is that books with provisional records are not shelved with classified volumes on the same topic and will, therefore, like items in circulation, be unavailable to browsers. Some libraries attempt to minimize this problem by shelving in-process materials in a public location and allowing them to circulate uncataloged.

One potential staff-related problem that has to do with human nature is that catalogers who do both full and minimal-level work may be tempted to agonize about the adequacy of each brief record and to enhance it with data which, while not individually time-consuming, add up to records not appreciably less costly than full ones. When too few original catalogers are available to handle all acquisitions, it may be appropriate to have brief records provided by nonprofessional staff, especially when there is hope that fuller cataloging can be provided at some future time.

Cooperation

For participants in bibliographic utilities, membership cooperation takes two major forms: shared cataloging (use of copy provided by another participant)

and shared resources (interlibrary loan access). Although other members' technical services personnel may be less content with a minimal than with a full record from which to derive copy, public services staff may be entirely satisfied with an MLC record for an item needed for interlibrary loan. Since ILL staff often develop considerable searching sophistication, they are apt to locate a brief record by its restricted access points. In the case of very limited access, the library user assisted by trained staff will undoubtedly be more likely to succeed in locating the desired item than a user consulting the catalog unaided.

Particular concerns arise regarding a library's obligation to provide full and timely cataloging for acquisitions in areas of special collection distinction. How can local interests, both narrow and broad,

be effectively weighed along with resource-sharing concerns? Area studies librarians are vitally interested in decisions affecting these materials and are beginning to be heard in this evaluation.

Concluding Observations

Minimal-level cataloging is a topic that deserves the growing interest it has recently evoked. Because the issues are complex and it is difficult to assess the impact on library users, the debate is likely to continue to produce active partisans. The following reactions offer a number of fascinating and provocative views.

References

¹*Library of Congress Information Bulletin*, November 10, 1978, p. 695.
